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Mission to Somaliland

First exploration of a larger *corpus*



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On the front cover a picture of a woman walking in Hargeysa.

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Introduction

The second mission of the Islam in the Horn of Africa Project (IslHornAfr) has been headed to Hargeysa (Somaliland) from 24 July to 6 August 2015. Participated to this mission Prof. Alessandro Gori (PI of IslHornAfr) and Dr. Michele Petrone (member of IslHornAfr). The whole mission has been based in Hargeysa, at the Hargeysa Cultural Center (HCC), a local institution founded by dr. Jama Musse Jama, president of the Redsea Cultural Foundation (www.redsea-online.com). It has been also the occasion to present the activities of the project during the 5th Hargeysa International Book Fair (HIBF, 2-10 August 2015, www.hargeysabookfair.com).



Image 1. Map of the areas directly or indirectly involved in the mission.

Islam on the Coast of Somaliland

Islam came to East African coast in subsequent different waves with merchant who progressively settled in the already existent cities (Zayla', Berbera) and founded new ones (Merca and Kismayo).¹

Muslims coming from Yemen and Arabian Peninsula were not only merchants, but also preachers and Sufis who spread Islam using written and oral texts.

Sufism played a central role in reviving Islam in 18th and 19th century Somalia, mainly through local branches of the Qādiriyya (with the outstanding personality of Uways al-Barawī, d. 1909) and of the Aḥmadiyya (founded by Aḥmad b. Idrīs, d. 1837), which took the form of a puritan order with Muḥammad 'Abdallāh "Cabdille" Ḥassan (d. 1920). The latter was member of the Ṣāliḥiyya (sub-order of the Aḥmadiyya) and led the anti-colonial movement known as "dervishes".²

Planning and Organization

In the framework of the HIBF Dr. Jama Musse Jama offered us his support to the project staff in organizing the mission, for what concerns accommodation, transportation and facilities. The acquisition of digital copies of the materials of the collection was carried out at the HCC, where the team was provided with a room and a space in the veranda to take pictures. As all the digitization activities were carried out at the HCC, there have been no particular issues regarding the organization of the process.

Hargeysa is the capital of the independent state of Somaliland, formerly part of the Somali State. While being an outpost of British protectorate since 1888, it gained the status of capital only on 1941. During the 80's the city was almost destroyed by bombing and crossfire during the clash between Siad Barre's regime and the Somali National Movement, a separatist part that obtained the control of the city. After the collapse of the Somali State in 1991 Somaliland declared its independence and chose Hargeysa as capital of the new state. From that date started a large-scale reconstruction followed by a wide urban expansion, financed both by local

¹ Some cities have been simply revived or expanded by Muslim traders and preachers.

² I. M. Lewis, *Saints and Somalis: Popular Islam in a Clan-Based Society*, Lawrenceville : The Red Sea Press, 1998, p. 60-62.

entrepreneurs and expatriates. The city is now equipped with good roads, 4G mobile internet connection, numerous hotels and other facilities.

The HCC is a local institution that hosts a library and other facilities used by local youngsters for courses and cultural activities organized by the Centre. As the presence of the project's team there coincided with the HIBF, several people (both male and female) had the possibility to ask question about the digitization process, its aims and methods.

The Collection

During our permanence in Hargeysa we had the possibility to have access to a collection of manuscripts and old book coming from the shrine of *ṣayḥ* Yūsuf/Yuusuf Maama³ in Berbera.

This city has been one of the most important ports for the Ethiopian reigns of 'Adal (1415-1520) and of Harar (1647-1875 and 1886-87),⁴ connecting them to Yemenite and Arabian trade routes. Other caravan paths connected Berbera to the Ḥauḍ region of the Ogaden.⁵ The extremely hot climate of the coastal region made the city more a seasonal outpost than a permanent settlement,⁶ this at least until the Egyptian occupation (1874-84).

Starting from the 1888, with the establishing of the British Somaliland protectorate, Berbera became a port supplying meat to the troupes based in Aden. In



Image 2. Manuscript and books of the collection, as found at our arrival.

³ Lewis (See I. M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy. A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*, International African Institute - LIT James Currey : Munster-Hamburg-Oxford, 1999, p. 19 (reprint with new introduction and afterword of the 1961 edition)), puts the shrine in Geri – Abba Yuunis.

⁴ A. Gori, *Contatti culturali nell'Oceano Indiano e nel Mar Rosso e processi di islamizzazione in Etiopia ed in Somalia*, Venezia : Cafoscarina, 2006, p. 23.

⁵ Michael R. T. Dumper and Bruce E. Stanley (eds.), *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa. A Historical Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara – Denver – Oxford, ABC – CLIO, 2007, p. 89.

⁶ There was an annual fair in October or November, where cattle were sold along with coffee, gum Arabic, myrrh, wax and other local products; see *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa*, cit., p. 90.

1960 the new-born state of Somaliland unified with the former Italian Somalia to form the new Somali Republic, while keeping a certain political autonomy. The situation dramatically changed with the advent of Siad Barre in 1969. The socialist doctrine of the new regime took position against Islam and any other religious manifestation. In this sense Berbera and other peripheral and minor cities became a good shelter for ‘*ulamā*’ and their books.

Dr. Jama Musse Jama, director of the HCC, has built a relation of mutual trust with the owners of the manuscripts and in order to facilitate our digitization work, he managed to bring a large sample of the materials to the HCC. This allowed us a quicker acquisition of digital copies, leaving more time to study them *in situ*. The presence of two local elders and of Ahmed I. Awale (historian and folklorist)⁷ was also of great help in identifying some names and texts.

The digitization involved 41 elements: 13 manuscripts and 28 printed books. The latter showed several handwritten ownership statements along with *marginalia* and other notes.

We had also the possibility to digitize 25 issues of “Xiddigta Oktoobar” (“The October Star”), a journal published during the years of the Siyaad Barre’s regime in Somalia (starting from the ‘80s until 1991).



The majority of the texts found in the collection are religious. Manuscripts are almost all poems, mainly connected to the Qādiriyya sufi order,⁸ while printed books cover the main areas of Islamic sciences (*tafsīr*, Prophetic traditions, jurisprudence); the provenance of printed materials varies a lot, including books coming from Egypt, Yemen and also Singapore.

Digitization process

The Photoset was assembled using a Manfrotto 90° camera stand (MT190XPRO4), a Nikon D800e camera with

Image 3. Photoset at the Hargeysa Cultural Center.

⁷ He published several works on Somaliland. Among those see Ahmad Ibrahim Awale, *The Mystery of the Land of Punt Unravalled*, Copenhagen : Liiban Publishers, 2013; Axmed Ibraahin Cawaale, *Sitaad: Is-Dareen Gelinta Diineed Ee Dumarka Soomaaliyeed*, Copenhagen : Liiban Publishers, 2013.

⁸ A single manuscript was property of Ahmad Awale, who kindly permitted us to digitize it.

24-85 Nikkor lens and a 0.6 "/1.5cm 112-LED lamp. Manuscripts were put on a black reemay non-woven black tissue and digitized with the aid of a colour scale. Weather conditions has been fairly good during our stay, while sunlight quickly changed during the day. The use of a led lamp diminished but not avoided the necessity of post-production of the images, taken both in .jpg and RAW format.

Other activities

During our permanence in Hargeysa we had the occasion to find and visit the shrine of *šayḥ* Maṭar (Sheekh Madar), considered the founder of the city. Here we met with one of his descendants and had the possibility to share some time with them, asking some questions about the foundation of the city and the saints buried in the complex. They also allowed us to be present to one of their Friday rituals and to record the poems they recited.

During the stay in Hargeysa we acquired a number of books about local history and saints (*šayḥ* Maṭar and others), both in Somali and in Arabic.

Among the events of the HIBF we have been part of a panel (on the 2nd of August) discussing the issues of safeguarding of cultural heritage in general and of manuscripts in particular. We presented the project and its activities, providing some information about the planning of our digitization activity and offering our collaboration for the development of local projects regarding manuscript culture.

Our presence in Somaliland gave us the possibility to establish a direct contact with the Ministry of Youth, Sports & Tourism, who offered its support for future missions in Somaliland; to this aim we have already prepared a list of interesting sites (Borama, Shiikh, Guriga Dariiqada etc.).



Image 4. Cultural Activities at the Hargeysa Cultural Center.

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